

48 *Infinity*

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*In loving memory of my Father
and my sister Leslie*

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The impact was brutal. The whip-lashing crunch of the collision shook teeth in their sockets. The frightening sounds of screeching and contorted metal careering into the same space, summoned fear. The four wheel drive was jerking violently, with the driver struggling to keep control. The sounds of bullets pinging and glass shattering added chorus, as the two cars lurched back and forth in a fateful rhythm.

It was only a short few hours ago that Professor Elizabeth Fox-Upton had met Dr. Jason Armstrong, and now his lanky well-attired body was sprawled over hers. Plunged face down into the back seat of the car they'd not long entered, they struggled for air, nostrils flaring. She could smell the freshly cleaned upholstery, it smelt of pine. Her immediate thoughts were not for herself and the impending danger, but for her dog Reggie.

'Reggie!' Elizabeth cried out, her voice muffled as she tried to move, her face and mouth obscured by the car seat and Dr. Armstrong's elbow.

'Just stay down!' snapped Jason. 'And tell Reggie to stay down.'

Reggie wagged her tail excitedly, thinking the whole exercise was a game.

'Sit down girl, nice and quiet,' she said, turning back to Jason. 'What is it? What's happening?'

He had no time to answer and instead shouted orders to the driver to get them out of there.

‘What do you think I’m doing? I’m pushing it as hard as I can,’ George snarled, irritated.

The doctor, who was still shielding Elizabeth, was trying to see what was happening.

Wind was rushing through the broken window, ushering more noise from the outside.

‘George?’ Jason shouted. ‘Are you all right? There’s blood running down the back of your neck.’

‘Hold on!’ he yelled, as he swung the steering wheel hard left smashing into their pursuers, re-engaging their twisted hold on the same space. The entangled cars mounted the gutter and sped along embraced as they stripped paint and left a trail of sparks bouncing off the roadside metal barriers. Without warning a pothole forced the vehicles apart.

George wrestled with the car and imposed his dominance and regained some control. Hair and blood blew into his mouth and eyes by the rogue wind. He was spitting and shaking his head, the blood and hair hindering his vision. ‘Get on the phone and find out where the back-up car is!’ he shouted.

Jason already had the phone out and was dialling. Before he could speak, a voice on the other end of the phone told him to turn hard right, move it and don’t stop. Jason relayed that to George who took action immediately. A few seconds passed and with enough kilometres covered, Jason looked up and out of the back window.

George also had one eye on the rear vision mirror. ‘It looks like we’ve lost them.’

Elizabeth pushed herself up and stretched her arm over the backseat into the cargo-hold. Reggie eagerly nudged the professor's hand to confirm she was okay. With that Elizabeth turned to the driver. She sat forward and gently put her hands on his neck to steady him. 'Are you in any pain?'

'No, no sense no feeling,' he joked.

'There's a lot of blood on the side of your face and neck. It's probably from broken glass. It doesn't look like you've been shot, but we'll have to see to it.' She was remarkably calm; a bluff perhaps. She didn't want to alarm the driver unnecessarily. 'There's a hospital not too far from here,' she said. 'We should get you there right away.'

'We can, but it's not much further to the plane. We can organize things from there,' Jason urged. His tone implied an order rather than a suggestion.

'Yeah,' George agreed. 'Let's just get all of you safely to the plane.'

That morning Professor Elizabeth Fox-Upton woke with her usual fresh enthusiasm for a new day, and was of course oblivious to what in only a few hours would turn her life upside-down.

It had already been an enormous week for Elizabeth. She had received a prestigious writing award for her controversial book *'Immortal Humans in an Infinite Universe'*. It largely presented her thesis about the direction of the human race.

On top of that the word was that she was going to be offered the Headship of the entire Psychiatric Department at the University, where she was currently a professor.

At just twenty-six years old, she'd be one of the youngest ever given such a post. It reflected the confidence her colleagues and the powers that be at the university had in her genius.

You wouldn't presume that genius just by looking at her. She had an air and softness about her that put you at ease the moment she spoke or smiled. Her smile was a catcher of hearts and a melter of malice. She wasn't like the hard-nosed or eccentric academics of genius ilk that marched the halls of many a university, brimming with self-importance or arrogance detectable at a glance. But she didn't

resemble the nerdy, pasty-faced lab locked genii, either.

Elizabeth had finished her morning jog with her constant companion Reggie, who was a sweet two-year-old, female, black and gold Doberman. Elizabeth was sitting in front of the mirror towel drying her long blonde hair after a refreshing shower, and smiling as she thought about what she might do with her day.

It was unusual that she had an entire day to herself.

Today she wasn't planning to work on her research, do any interviews or go to the University. On this rare day off, Elizabeth had nothing specific organized.

Her roomy airy bedroom was drenched with the morning sun, which intensified the crispness of this beige and linen white room that smelt of mint.

As Elizabeth finished drying her hair and brushed it gently back off her face behind her ears and over her shoulders, the phone rang to the tune of Beethoven's fifth.

Her beautiful jade green eyes moved their gaze from the mirror to her beloved Reggie, sitting up and awaiting instructions.

'Okay girl, I've got it,' she said as she patted her. Elizabeth stood up and walked to the bedside table to answer her phone.

Recognizing the flashing light as front door security, she answered by almost singing the words. 'Good morning Trevor, how are you today?'

'Thank you Professor I'm fine, there is ...'

'Trevor,' she interrupted. 'I've asked you to call me Fox, everyone just calls me Fox! It's been more than ten months since you were assigned to be my security; when will you relax?'

'Yes Mam, Professor, Miss Fox,' he stumbled, settling on Miss Fox. 'There's a gentleman here to see you. He is from some science foundation called the 'Science For Humanity Research Institute', SFHRI. It's pronounced Safari according to him, Dr Jason Armstrong. He's insistent about seeing you, Mam. He also said you have a mutual friend, a Dr. Fredrick Alpine.'

'Fredrick,' she thought, with fondness. Fox adored and respected Dr. Alpine. She had received an email from him not two days earlier, suggesting a friend of his would call on her. He didn't specify who or why or give a name, only that someone would be calling and the caller would use him as a reference.

'Okay Trevor, show him into the study. I'll be there in about five.'

Fox moved toward the wardrobe and removed the towel that had been wrapped around her hips like a topless hula girl. She placed it neatly over the airing rail inside the walkthrough wardrobe, then shimmed into a pair of black jeans and pulled on a small green top. The top was short, just above the navel. It accentuated her tiny waist and exaggerated her height.

She chose a pair of black slip-ons from the shoe rack. The shoe rack was perfectly arranged in rows of types of shoes and by colour, the whole wardrobe precisely organized with nothing out of place.

That impression of precise organization carried throughout Fox's home, right down to the way she squared a book neatly on her bedside table or centred her flower arrangements just so.

There was only one exception that contradicted the perfect symmetry of her home and that was Reggie's chew toys.

Fox was straightening her clothes as she went back to her dressing-table for jewellery, some little stud earrings in the shape of arching dolphins that were given to her by her late parents. They were her favourite earrings and they suited her.

Trevor stood at the open door to the study, watching Dr Armstrong, who was browsing a wall of books.

As a medical physician, psychiatrist and a professor of psychiatry, a social anthropologist, researcher and author, Fox had amassed a notable collection of books.

Among the collection was the book Fox had written almost one year prior. It had caused a furore among many religious groups, including some of the most menacing of the many different groups her ideas had offended when it was published.

Dr Armstrong reached out and took a copy of the book, *Immortal Humans in an Infinite Universe* from the bookcase and opened it.

He turned to the acknowledgement page and there at the top of the list was a dedication to Dr. Alpine.

‘Dr Fredrick Alpine, a teacher, mentor and trusted friend’ it read.

Fox entered the room and it came to life, her presence bringing a certain sparkle. She went straight up to Jason, offering her outstretched hand. Her smile imposed an automatic response, an irresistible willingness to return the smile and then some. Fox was used to people’s response to her. Most would fall

about to clear the way, hand her whatever she required, fluff cushions or straddle a mud puddle, whatever it took so she could continue on her way unscathed.

He responded smiling the smile of a gentleman, and a handshake while holding on to her book in his left hand. He successfully covered any acknowledgment that she was beautiful with a dignified respectful look.

She appreciated that. She never sought to use her physical appearance for self-gain, in fact it mostly embarrassed her.

‘Good morning Dr Armstrong,’ she said cheerfully, as they completed their handshake. She gestured towards the two leather armchairs that were placed for intimate debate, by a large coffee-table. ‘Please sit down,’ she suggested, showing the way with an elegant ballerina’s circular wrist movement, and held her pose so her guest could move forward towards the chairs.

‘Thank you.’ Jason reclined into one of the handmade leather chairs. It was comfortable with its big deep arms, high back and soft cushioned leather.

He was about to speak when Fox beat him to it.

‘How do you know Fredrick?’ she enquired, assuming control easily. She was sitting with her back straight, undecided about her feelings for this visitor, cautious for the moment.

‘Dr Alpine has been consulting on a project I’m involved with. He spoke highly of you.’ Jason removed a card from his pocket and handed it to Fox. ‘Fredrick wrote a small message on the back and

signed it. He said you would recognize his handwriting. He also said to say hello to Reggie.'

Fox accepted the card, she grinned knowing that Fredrick would indeed have said hello to Reggie, he adored her. He was with Fox when she went to bring Reggie home as a six-week-old puppy. She was such a naughty inquisitive little bundle of joy. Fredrick and Fox played with her for hours that day. She began to read the message on the card.

He is a good man, you can trust him.

Yours,

Fredrick Alpine.

Fox looked up at Jason and questioned him further. 'Are you a doctor of medicine?'

'No, my doctorate is in Physics. Mathematics and Quantum Physics are my areas of expertise.'

He had a confidence absent of arrogance, and she found herself warming to him.

'Okay Jason Armstrong, Dr of Physics, I'm curious, why *are* you here?'

'Do you mind, our conversation must be in absolute privacy.' With that he looked towards Trevor who was in earshot just aside the door to the study.'

Jason returned his focus to Fox and stared straight into her eyes, held her gaze and reiterated. 'It's important that we have privacy. Perhaps you could ask your security man to give us some space.'

She held his stare for a moment. His neat blond short back and sides hairstyle was betrayed by a

long unruly fringe hanging over his right eye. He felt honest she thought, as she studied his face. Her instincts hadn't let her down in the past, so she rose from her seat.

'Dr Armstrong, would...'

'Please call me Jason,' he urged.

'Okay Jason, call me Fox. Would you like something to drink, mineral water or green tea perhaps?'

'Sure, that would be great,' Jason accepted.

'Please help yourself.' She gestured to where he would find the refreshments, and walked towards Trevor.

Outside the door she acknowledged Reggie with a pat. Reggie's loyal eager-to-please expression was with typical Doberman attitude, one that suggested a lurking danger. She waited in position displaying her regal stance and showing off her immaculate coat, her pedigree indisputable and her obedience absolute.

'Trevor, what do you think of Dr Armstrong?'

'He has no weapons on him and didn't show up on my computer as a hostile or criminal, Mam.'

'Okay, thanks Trevor. Would you mind giving us some privacy- perhaps you could go back to the entry desk.'

'Yes Professor,' he replied, heading towards the front of the house.

Turning to go back into the study Fox called Reggie to join her and on entering the room Fox introduced her to Jason.

Jason was at ease with dogs it seemed. He wasn't at all wary, as most people tend to be

especially of a Doberman. He held out his hands for her to sniff. 'Is she the Reggie Fredrick mentioned?'

'The very one,' she said proudly, as a parent might have about an exceptional child. 'Okay Reggie, say hello to Jason.'

Reggie reacted well towards him and presented her paw, her little rear end and stubby cropped tail was wiggling away merrily.

Fox trusted Reggie's instincts as much as her own. Reggie didn't see him as a threat so with that Fox asked her to hop up on the couch.' She did so and positioned herself with a clear view of Fox and the stranger. Her deep black eyes staring, like pools of darkness with no hint of intent or awareness, only instinct lived there, primitive and unpredictable, bound to human civility by Fox alone.

Fox settled back into the armchair opposite Jason and beckoned him to begin. 'You have my undivided attention; please tell me what this is all about.'

Jason sipped from a glass of water he had just pored, and then began. 'Your book *Immortal Humans in an Infinite Universe*,' he said, as he picked it up from the table. It was unnecessary to speak the title, but he enjoyed the words, the sound of them, the feel of them rolling off his tongue and the excitement of their meaning. 'Your insight and overview is incredibly far-sighted.'

He shifted his deep blue eyes and concentration to Fox. He stared directly at her, as if to give fair warning of the seriousness and importance of what he was about to reveal.

‘What would you say if I told you we have succeeded with genome manipulation in a human? And just what you envisaged is now a possibility, a human that doesn’t get sick, doesn’t age and thus will not die, an immortal human is a reality?’ He was holding on firmly to a manner of professionalism, waiting for Fox’s response. Yet there was an aura of expectation around him an excitement hiding restrained just below the surface.

Fox was overwhelmed with goose bumps and the look on her face was not surprise, it was a grin and a gleam that hinted at a self-satisfied knowing.

‘I knew it!’ she said out loud. ‘Sooner than I had imagined, but I knew it. Tell me everything,’ she begged. All her senses were heightened. She could hear the clock ticking loudly, and heard a car door slamming closed in a distant street. She could smell the fragrance of the freshly cut purple orchids drifting from their crystal place on her desk.

She worked her way to the edge of her seat, her arms outstretched with her hands gesturing for more information. ‘Everything!’ she demanded.

The leather of the chair squeaked as Jason leaned forward. He looked at her again with his confident fixed stare and spoke in a slightly different tone. Until then he spoke casually with a friendly overtone, but now his voice had lowered and took on a serious edge.

‘Before I tell you the reason I’m here I’d like to ask you a few questions.’

She answered him quickly. ‘Sure, what about?’ she said, trying to move him along.

‘Some aspects of your research work, your book and your theories are of great interest to Safari. It’s important that I ascertain the extent of your conviction to your work before I can go any further,’ he said hesitantly. He apologized if it was impertinent, but it would become clear later, why it was necessary. ‘If you have no objections, we could get started. It would be helpful if we weren’t disturbed for awhile?’

He placed her book back on the table next to a darkish flaw in the wood grain. It was shaped like an exclamation mark, a long darkish streak with a not quite circular dot just under it. It appeared to punctuate her work.

Not phased in the least by his need to question, nor by his change of tone, she sat even closer to the edge of her seat. She put her hands to either side of her, grabbing the chair. ‘You cannot say something like *‘what you envisaged is now fact - an immortal human is a reality’*, and think that I wouldn’t make time to hear why you’re here telling me this!’

Fox looked directly back into his eyes. Reading people was something Fox was trained to do but more than that she loved studying people. For her, the face was the most interesting physical aspect of people, a treasure trove of information. From basic appearance, which is there for all to see, to the furtive fleeting blinks and twitches that are revealing to the discerning eye?

She detected no such cloaked deception on his face or in his eyes. The doctor looked to be in his twenties and handsome. There was not a wrinkle or a blemish anywhere. Perhaps there’d be time for her to

consider why she thought he was handsome later. She pushed herself from her chair and stood up.

Reggie raised her head and jumped off the couch and went straight to Fox's side. 'It's okay Reggie, back to the couch...good girl.'

Fox went to her desk and picked up the phone. 'Trevor I don't want to be disturbed until further notice.' There was a short pause, she thanked him and then hung up the phone and with lightning speed was back to her chair in a second, her shadow just keeping up with her.

She was clearly excited. The eagerness to continue the conversation with Jason was written all over her face and underlined with a huge irrepressible beaming smile.

As she settled into her seat Jason opened her book...